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ABSTRACT

The centrality of school leadership as a necessary element for school success is a well-determined part of the educational leadership research canon. Although school leadership is broad-based and includes many factors, the central role the principal plays is most often seen as a pivot around which much of a school's progress depends. However, it is apparent, particularly from the self-reports of practicing principals, that the work of school principals is becoming more difficult and complex. As expectations rise for schools to increase academic success, there are growing shortages of qualified applicants for some school principal positions, particularly in some urban locations and at the secondary level. The findings in this study are part of a larger project funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds "Leaders Count" education initiative. This initiative looks at the central question: "Can we attract, train and keep enough future leaders of quality and vision to realize the unmet goal of educational excellence for all children?" The project reported here falls under the umbrella of five projects to examine both the principalship and the superintendency from policy and practice frameworks. This is a work-in-progress and is the 2nd year of a 3-year effort. (Contains 14 references.) (DFR)

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Explorations in Principal Leadership Across an Array of School Types

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Introduction

The centrality of school leadership as a necessary element for current school success is a well-determined part of the educational leadership research canon (Leithwood & Duke, 1999). The central role of school leadership, while broad based (e.g., teacher leadership, community and parent leadership), the part the principal plays is most often seen as a pivot around which much of a school's progress depends. For those engaged in both school administrator preparation and research activities around school leaders, we rely on foundational and emerging perspectives of leadership to advance basic knowledge about the challenges of what it takes to bring a school together around a common mission of educating all children.

What seems to be increasingly apparent, particularly from practicing principals (Kochan, Jackson, & Duke, 1999; Portin, Shen, & Williams, 1998) is that the work of school principals is becoming more difficult and complex (Alexander, 1992). Layered responsibilities, enduring paradoxes (Ogawa, Crowson, Goldring, 1999), and developing schools to meet a vast array of needs makes "expert leadership" (Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1994) a tall order for both practicing and potential school leaders. In addition, both political rhetoric and policy action emphasize the tightly-linked responsibility of school leaders to raise student achievement in standards-based reform. At the same time as expectations rise for schools to increase the academic success of all students, there is a growing sense of unease about impending shortages in the supply of qualified applicants for some school principal positions and in certain parts of the country. This is particular apparent at the secondary level and in some urban locations (NASSP, 2000).

Traditional understandings of school leadership, those largely embedded in the characteristics of position, lack explanatory power in the complex school context of today's

accountability reforms. It would seem that complex instructional mandates, coupled with school contexts that have to pay more attention to intense and diverse student needs, beg a deeper examination of what occurs in the everyday working world of school leaders.

There are a wide range of essential activities that mark the responsibility of those who would aspire to the principalship. These encompass the strategic, instructional and managerial imperatives—assuring the quality of the instructional program while simultaneously assuring a safe and resourced facility for instruction to occur. In each of these areas of core function, much rests on the shoulders of the designated leader, the principal. However, increasingly, shared responsibility has become both necessary and desired. Some of the more contemporary ideas of the "principal as instructional leader" (Blase & Blase, 1998; Gil, 2001) reinforce that instruction lies at the heart of the school and shed light on the shared nature of this work. In this study, we start with these central roles, but look to the array of school types to see if there are ways that that key principal roles are conducted that might bring a different understanding—one that makes the principalship do-able.

Added to that, this study explores what that might mean for how we both support and prepare school leaders. This challenging mix of expectation and practice (Murphy, 1992) contribute the central questions and theme of this year's convention. This study aims to contribute to an understanding of the links between leadership and learning in schools.

Project description

The findings in this study are part of a larger project funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, "Leaders Count" education initiative. The "Leaders Count" initiative is making a multi-million dollar investment in educational leadership research to address the central question: "Can we attract, train, and keep enough future leaders of quality and vision to

realize the unmet goal of educational excellence for all children?" (Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, Leaders Count RFP). The project reported here falls under the umbrella of five projects funded at the University of Washington to examine both the principalship and superintendency from policy and practice frameworks. The emerging findings of the other studies are ongoing and not reported in this paper. It should also be noted that this is a work-in-progress. We are in the second year of the a three-year effort and the analytic categories presented here are emerging.

Research Questions

This study of principal roles across an array of school types is designed to pay specific attention to how the principalship is changing and the set of experiences, skills and attitudes that are most necessary for practicing principals and for those in preparation. The specific research questions of the study include:

- How are changes underway in the organization of public schools systems–especially in the devolution of staffing, budget and instructional decisions to individual schools–likely to change the role of the principalship?
- How do principals' roles in traditional public schools differ from those in private schools and the growing number of public magnet and charter schools?
- Are there core roles that all principals play regardless of the type of schools they lead?
- How do the content of current training programs and the nature of principal certification match up against the requirements of the job? What do the current training and certification programs fail to cover? What do they prescribe unnecessarily?

These broad questions have guided the first year of data collection in schools. However, as the research progresses, new questions, more specific questions, are coming to the fore. There is an important dialogue that occurs in the analytic process that is an advantage of a broad-based

research team. We have used research team meetings to address three levels of questions, "sensitizing", "theoretical", and "practical and structural" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 77-8). Through a combination of cross-case comparison and interaction between emerging concepts a wide set of emerging questions have developed. This will be apparent in the in-progress findings and discussion section of this paper.

Research Methods

The larger project, of which this is one of five, uses an array of strategies for policy research, fieldwork, and theory building. For this project, we set out to study not only principals, but to look carefully at the context of leadership—at the school, its community, and the activities that mark the day to day life of the school. In order to understand context as well as role, case study methodology has been employed. Schools have been selected in urban areas in four small to mid-size cities in four states. We have used cities in the states of Washington, Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin. To preserve anonymity, the sites and individuals are not identified.

In site selection, a purposeful sampling strategy was employed. The study emphasizes urban settings with complex challenges to student learning, resources, and policy turbulence. In addition, the cases selected represent principals who, at some level, are perceived as making progress on the particular set of core challenges they face. In this sense, the project has relied on the opportunity of prior research networks and contacts around the country. Even though the schools sampled represent four states and operate under an array of state policy directions, we make no claim to generalize from the cases presented to all 50 states. There are, however, enough similarities within these four states and, perhaps, across all 50, in order to raise critical questions about what is occurring in these contexts.

As of this date, 15 case studies have been completed in four US cities. The array is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Case study sample

Location/ School Type	**Traditional Public School**	**Non-Traditional School (e.g. charter, magnet)**	**Private School (sectarian & non sectarian)**
Washington	1 elementary	1 secondary	1 elementary 1 secondary
Wisconsin	1 elementary	1 elementary 1 secondary	1 elementary 1 secondary
Ohio	1 elementary 1 secondary	1 elementary/secondary	
Illinois	1 secondary	1 elementary 1 secondary	

The case study is carried out in a one to two-day visit with at team of between two to four researchers. Methods of data collection include extended interviews with the principal, assistant principals, other designated leaders, and a sample of teaching and support staff; observation in classrooms, meetings, and informal activities of the school; and document analysis of all pertinent descriptive documents that pertain to school operations and core values. Case summaries and analytic memoranda (Miles & Huberman, 1994) are prepared by the researchers and both within-case and across-case analysis have been carried out using a largely inductive, grounded theory approach.

In-Progress Findings and Discussion

The findings presented in this paper represent the mid-point of this study. In this sense, they are preliminary and will be subject to a further round of data collection during the 2001-02 school year. Nevertheless, a number of important themes are emerging from the data collected thus far.

One of the ways that the evolving principalship has been characterized in the literature and some policy studies has been through the increase of sheer load—a job that is becoming, and has been perceived to already have become, virtually impossible to accomplish. A number of metaphors have been used to represent this new sense of load and responsibility. Weindling (1992) characterized the UK principalship as "marathon running on a sand dune," an image that in the early stages of UK reform shares many elements with the standards-based reform initiatives in this country. The burdens of legislated change with increased responsibilities without, necessarily, the attendant authority, has made the job as frustrating the running on sand.

In our earlier work (Portin & Williams, 1997) we found principals talking about the principalship like the layers of an onion. In that study, however, the principals reported that the layers of the onion weren't being peeled away, but were instead being accreted. Principals spoke of each year a new responsibility, a new program, and new task without anything being taken away from their already heavy load. For many of these principals, the idea of one more layer of responsibility had, in some cases, pushed them to reconsider the viability of the principalship as currently conceived.

What this image suggests is a job that is almost out-of-control; a job that only individuals with "super human" characteristics could take on. Whether considered heroic or not, the sheer weight seemed to mean countless hours and the heavy toll that could take on health and the personal life of principals.

In the current study, we have sought to explore whether that is still the case. Whether one of the greatest challenges to the job continues to be largely shaped by utter load or whether there are new ways of enacting the role that amount to a reconceptualization of the principalship. In order to do this, one of our strategies is to look at the array of schools that principals lead. We

want to see not only the traditional public school principalship, but also the principalship across the greatest range of school types that the resources of the study allow. This has meant interviewing principals and visiting private schools as well, both sectarian and non-sectarian. Parochial, charter, voucher, magnet, each are represented in the sample.

Our sampling strategy depends to a strong degree on opportunity and doesn't make a claim to being representative of all the states and types of schools in the country. We have used four states (Washington, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin). While not claiming broad geographic representation, the sample does, however, provide four states with both important similarities and differences. Some of the states (Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio) have charter provisions, Washington does not. All the states, however, have engaged in accountability-based education reform issued from the state level. This has included the development and institution of statewide performance testing and the broad dissemination of test results as a means of determining school quality.

We found in this study echoes of prior studies, some very predictable conceptions of the principalship, and also some quite intriguing surprises. Of course, the principalship does vary across school types, that could reasonably be predicted before the study began. What is interesting and worth our time is they way these differences manifest themselves and how the emerging implications from these cross case comparisons may inform the preparation of principals and how they enact their role in schools.

This is still a job for heroes, but what this study illuminates is that heroism may be more a matter of creativity and leadership "savvy" than weight of personality or endurance. There are core competencies, but what the emerging data appear to illustrate is that the diverse

principalship is more a matter of competent responsibility of key functions, rather than a renaissance-like embodiment of capacity to meet all the needs of the school.

In the remaining space of this paper, I present five themes of emerging importance in our ongoing analysis. Some are predictable, but each suggest important, often subtle shifts, in the principalship and how we conceive of who can best fulfil the role.

Theme 1: There seem to be an array of core roles that principals play depending on school type.

This study has presented an important opportunity to examine the principalship across both school size and level, but also across the array of traditional public, private, charter and magnet schools. The data collected to-date suggest that although all principals pay close attention to instruction, the larger the school, the less likely the principal will assume a role of, what might be termed, direct instructional leadership. Instead, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they will focus on the strategic direction and priorities for the school. These strategic roles can be around development activities, fund-raising, and capital campaigns in the case of private schools, and developing plans to meet perceived and identified weaknesses in their instructional program (as revealed by state student testing).

It also seems apparent in most of these schools that the need for diversified or devolved leadership structure is based on the complexity of the school and its tasks not necessarily its size. We have visited small charter and private schools with under 400 students that have utilized their staffing budgets to allow for a wide variety of differentiated roles among the teaching and other professional staff. Heads of school, development officers, and deans of students are common arrangements in schools where staffing is locally determined.

One analytic means that we have used in determining a key set of roles and how they are distributed across the school is illustrated in Table 2. The table does not yet incorporate all the

sites due to analysis and data reduction timelines, but does serve an illustrative purpose. The roles across the top, in some cases, borrow from the business sector as a means of describing a core function. The roles include: Instructional leader; cultural leader (responsible for attending to climate and the symbolic resources of the school); chief operating officer (responsible for day to day functional capacity of the school); chief executive officer (accountability for the efforts and results of the school, including strategic direction setting); chief development officer/external to the school (builder of external support, public relations); and chief development officer/internal to the school (responsible for the professional development activities of the school). What the table illustrates, for analytic purposes, is that we are finding in the public schools that this array of roles falls primarily on the sole shoulders of the principal. In the independent and charter schools, the roles are more diffuse and a greater number of people participate in the key roles.

Table 2: Analytic matrix of roles (partial).

School	Instructional leader	Cultural leader	Chief Operating officer	Chief Executive officer	Chief development officer (external to the school)	Chief development officer (internal to the school)
School A: WA parochial	2 Assistant principals	Principal	2 Assistant principals	Principal	Principal	2 assistant principals & all Teachers
School B: WA independent	Shared, Principal, & 2 head teachers	Principal	2 head teachers	Principal	Principal	All Teachers
School C: WA public	Principal (diffuse)	Principal & block of senior teachers	Principal	Principal	?	?
School D: IL public	Assistant principal & Principal	Principal & Assistant principal	Assistant principal	Principal	Principal?	Assistant principals & department heads
School E: IL magnet	Principal, Curriculum Leader, Technology leader	Principal	Principal Assistant principal, Dean	Principal	Principal	Assistant principal, Curriculum Leader
School F: IL charter	Principal (diffuse among many members of staff)	Principal & school charter	Sr. Secretary.	Principal	Principal	Teacher teams

Theme 2: The coupling mechanism of supervisory and governing bodies largely determines the role of the principal.

The study examined schools with various levels of linkage to governing bodies. This has included linkage to traditional school district central administrative authorities, archdiocese governance and support, and local governing board structures. The data suggest that the principals in a tightly coupled system is little able to ascend beyond being a middle manager. However, in "single-unit" schools, schools that are less tightly coupled to a larger organizational system, the principal devotes more time to establishing priorities for the use of time (e.g.

professional development and meeting time) and keeps time focused on the central ethic of the school.

Of course, in the "uncoupled" school much of the time the principal must devote is to fairly basic issues of institutional survival. For example, in the charter schools studied in Illinois and Ohio, the schools were in the early stages of their institutional life. The principals reported allocating time to assure that there was an adequate student enrollment base and that the necessary funds were available to assure viability from year to year. The same is the case for the parochial schools. While quite important managerial decisions, these principals spent time linking the resource tasks to the overall mission of the school—in this case, the service of the school's charter.

In schools tightly coupled to a central authority, more time was reported in completing administrative tasks for the district and, in some instances, to figuring out how to "work within the system" to get the support that was needed for the school. For one principal in an Ohio high school, this was underscored by the expertise and insight that had been garnered to him as a former central office administrator. He reported knowing how to get the resources that were needed because of insider knowledge of how the district worked as a whole.

Referring back to Table 2, Schools A, B, E, and F each represent contexts where the school, through the principal and site board, have the freedom to distribute key roles and functions across the school to a range of staff. This would seem to imply that, at least in this small sample of independently governed schools, the principalship carries more direct weight of responsibility, but the ability to distribute the leadership of the school provides opportunities that are not seen in the same degree in the traditional public schools of this sample.

Theme 3: The crucial decision set affecting the role of the principal is around a series of key choices.

Regardless of school type, the principals engaged in varying degrees with a series of key questions. These include: Who comes to the school (students and families)? Who gets to work at the school? And what lies at the center of the school's culture providing a sense of social/professional cohesion? Not surprisingly, principals in independently governed schools place more of their time and role around these questions. As a result, principals in independent schools (both charter and private) assume a role more akin to the superintendent of a district. In addition, private and charter school principals seem to have to spend greater time considering the political context of the school and assuring both constituent support and the healthy workings of a local governing board.

Of this array of key decisions, perhaps the most apparent is the decision making authority that varies from school type is that around personnel. Deciding who to either invite onto the school staff, or who may not be a good match for the direction the school is headed, is a concern and priority expressed by each of the principals in this study. A key difference in school type is the degree of freedom that is afforded to the school in personnel decisions. None of the principals interviewed thus far (public or independent) expressed having no decision making authority around staffing. However, for the public school principals the process was made more complex by commitments to the provision of the collective bargaining agreement and district policy. This seems to illustrate the middle-management function of some principals in tightly bound district systems. In other words, the decision of "who gets to work here" is made elsewhere, at the district level, and the school-level decision is more a placement decision rather than a hiring decision.

In each of the schools, basic operational strategies (some resource decisions, scheduling, event planning, etc.) have team-based elements. A key difference seems to be how the team-based roles are regularized among the school types. Is, for example, a teacher's participation in a operational activity part of their job description or allocated to an extended contract. One matter that influences this, beyond school type, is clearly school size. In the smaller schools, there is more of an expectation that teachers will play multiple roles.

Theme 4: Practicing principals value on-the-job experience above the training they receive in most principal preparation programs.

In order to address the role that principal preparation has contributed to the working life of the participants, each were asked to comment on the adequacy of their preparation. Most of the respondents in the study have indicated little reliance on their professional preparation programs for the exercise of their roles. The data suggest that traditional principal preparation is oriented toward middle management training, and, therefore, is largely seen as irrelevant to the work they do. This was not expressed by all of the respondents and the degree of applicability seemed to be associated with amount of time that had elapsed since receiving their training. The pattern within the responses seems to indicate that novice principals find a closer connection between the tasks they face than those who have been in the principalship for some time. The data are unclear whether preparation programs have substantively changed or whether there is something about the tasks that experienced principals attend to later in their career that shapes their perception of preparation. Most of the principals interviewed in this study, however, draw closer links to mentoring and prior experience than to formal training.

Theme 5: The principal as responsible for instruction.

The school administrator mantra of the 1980s and into the 1990s was, "The Principal as Instructional Leader." To our surprise, we have found a subtle, but quite important shift in how instructional leadership is conceived by a number of the principals in our sample. In many of the schools we visited, we saw less of what can be characterized as "principal as instructional leader" in the traditional sense. Instead, we have seen a greater representation of "principal as responsible for instruction."

Certainly, the long history of the principal-teacher, the principal as the instructional exemplar, the principal as the monitor of instructional quality continues to bear strong influence on both who is in the principalship and what the principal does in the role. In all schools we have studied to date, the principal's instructional leadership varied quite widely. However, if the school was moving forward in both instructional practice and innovative programs, the principal was still deeply connected to instruction.

Few principals we have observed fit traditional notions of the principal as the "fount-of-all knowledge" about instruction. Instead, they manifest their instructional leadership by maintaining a strong responsibility for holding instruction as the core of the school. How did this "responsibility for instruction" manifest itself?

Effective principals can "smell" good instructional practice.

In the interviews,\ we ask principals is to identify the teachers in the school who are particularly strong or who exercise a leadership role in instructional practice for others in the school. Whether from their own teaching experience, experience as professional development provider, or evaluator of practice, principals retain some touchstone to the centers of effective

instruction in the school. In the private schools, there appeared to be a greater degree of shared responsibility for this with key teacher leaders or those with departmental responsibility.

Principal instructional leadership is most often strategically manifest in the hiring process.

The principals in this study held the teacher hiring process in high regard. Furthermore, deciding who gets to teach at a school is one of the key variables between the school types studied in this project. In private and charter schools, the principal and local board had virtually free hands in hiring. As noted earlier, in district schools, the process was more prescribed by collective bargaining agreement and district policy. While principals expressed respect for the contract, they did express frustration over not always having the degrees of freedom to hire who they thought best for some positions. On the other hand, they had often developed strategies particularly around timing of openings which provided greater flexibility in the hiring pool.

Distributed instructional leadership is more apparent when the principals are free from contractual obligations to be the sole evaluator and they have budgetary and staffing discretion. This is often manifest in the differentiated teaching and leadership roles that teachers assume in schools that are self-governing either by chartering provision or independent status. These differentiated roles can go by a variety of titles such as head of "upper/lower" school, department head, assistant principal, curriculum director. In other words, the organizational format of the school could be arrayed in such a way to provide legitimacy to their role and an arena for these teachers to exercise their instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership is tied to data expertise.

In this time of accountability and high stakes testing, someone in the school has to have the ability to disaggregate and interpret test and demographic data. What we found is this is

another area where sometimes the principal plays this role directly, but in all cases, if responsibility for instruction is exercised by the principal then they at least knew who should and could exercise that role in the school.

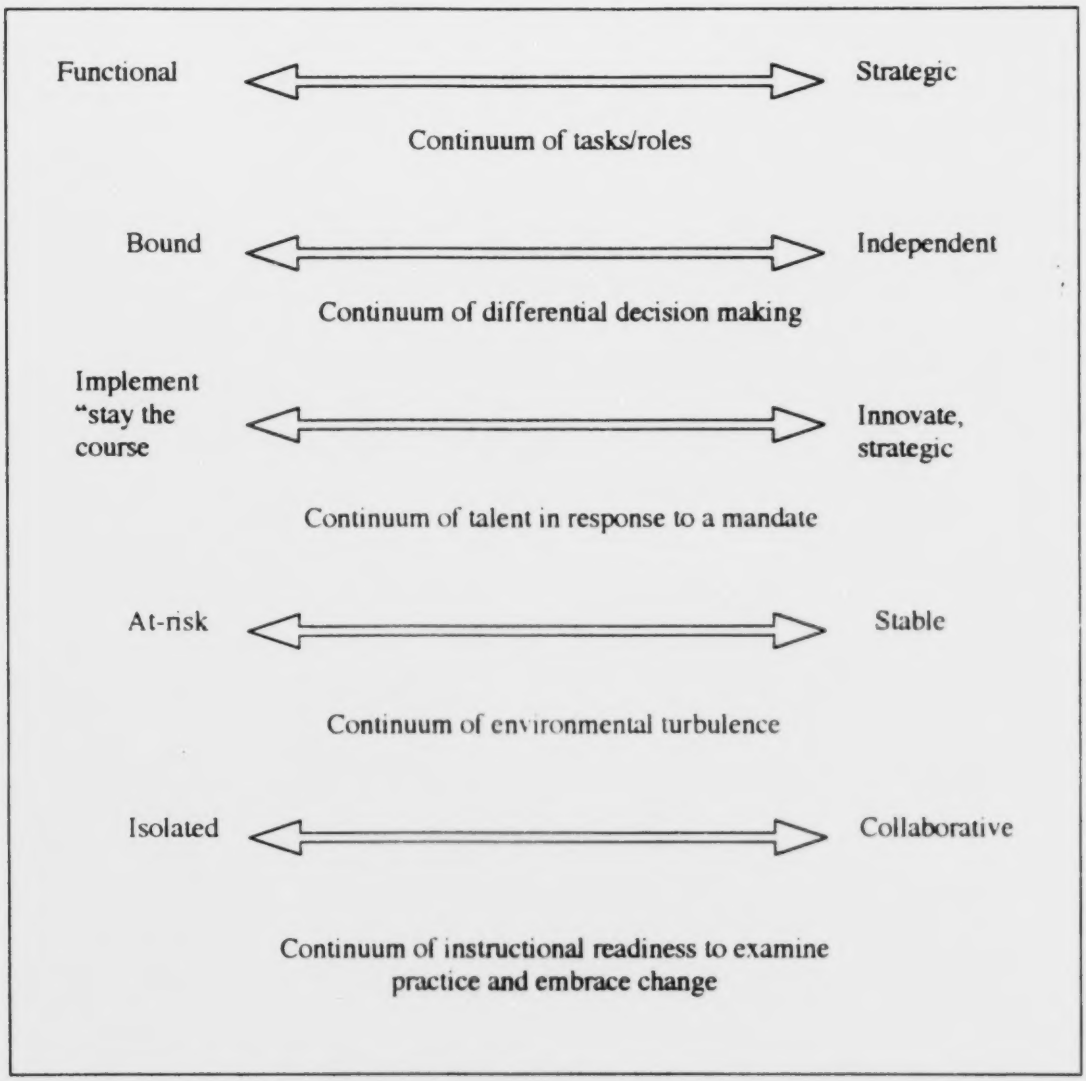
Implications and Next Steps

As indicated, this study is still in progress. It does, however, present an important opportunity to address not only how the role of the principal is changing, but also how universities prepare principals for a wide range of schools. In addition, the opportunity to examine the role of principals in a wide variety of schools contributes to goal of finding ways to support future leaders who serve in a number of school types. In other words, it aims to anticipate the future as well as describing the current state.

What the data from this study seem to underscore is that there is not likely to be a single conception of the principalship that can or will cut across school types. The principalship, instead, represents an ability to respond to a variety of contextual factors and align the internal arrangement of the school and its staff to best focus on the learning needs of students.

The data at this early stage suggest that the principalship is less determined by school type and more by a continuum of resources, decisions, and organizational dimension. Visually, it might be represented as a sequence of at least five dimensions (see Figure 1) that are all interrelated.

Figure 1: Analytic continua of the principalship



What the figure represents is that as a school moves along any of the five continua, that movement has an ability to affect the other four continua. For example, a school that falls on the "bound" end of the continuum of differential decision making may orient the principalship more toward decision implementation (middle management) versus pursuing opportunities for innovation. As another illustration, when a school is at-risk in some manner (e.g. financial, student population) it may tend to skew leadership roles more toward the functional end of tasks and roles.

The next stages of this study will further explore these and other questions. As additional fieldwork is completed and the data subject to further analysis, these preliminary findings may be reinforced or recede into the background. In any case, the variety and centrality of the principalship remains a potent source of potential for all types of schools to succeed in the directions they set.

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